



POLICE1

STAYING ALERT:

WHAT OFFICERS NEED TO IMPROVE SITUATIONAL AWARENESS

This exclusive companion report to Police1's "What Cops Want in 2025" survey reveals how officers combine awareness skills and new tools to stay safe

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FROM THE EDITOR

The public may think situational awareness is as simple as looking sharp and staying alert. TV shows make it seem effortless — an officer spots a threat instantly, responds flawlessly and technology always works in the background. But in the real world, awareness is messy, complex and constantly challenged by information overload.

That's why Police1's "What Cops Want in 2025" survey asked officers directly: Is today's technology helping you stay aware and safe on the street? Their answers reveal both progress and frustration. Tools like body-worn cameras, ALPR and real-time alerts are making a difference — but gaps in integration, reliability and training still leave officers vulnerable.

Situational awareness isn't broken, but it's under pressure. Officers want tools that work seamlessly, policies that reflect reality and leaders who understand the demands of the street. What follows is a candid look at how technology is shaping situational awareness today — and what needs to improve.

Be sure to bookmark our "What Cops Want" content hub to access additional results from this year's survey: <https://www.police1.com/what-cops-want>.

Stay safe,

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EYES UP:

WHY SITUATIONAL AWARENESS CAN'T AFFORD TO FAIL



Photo/Getty Images

BY Tim Dees

Survey findings reveal how information overload, uneven technology and gaps in training put officer safety at risk — and what must change

Situational awareness is a critical law enforcement skill. One of the more common reasons rookie officers fail field training is their inability to manage the constant stream of information coming at them. Officers must monitor the radio, keep an eye on suspects or potential suspects, be able to state their precise location on demand, evaluate the statements of those they are interacting with

for veracity and content, and constantly assess whether what they are seeing constitutes a law violation.

Sensory saturation is a common problem — when an officer becomes overwhelmed, they may stop seeing or hearing anything at all.

While technology has improved officer safety, it often adds new layers of information to monitor. In addition to the traditional demands, officers may now need to respond to alerts from automated license plate recognition (ALPR) systems, vehicle proximity alarms, and constant beeps, buzzes and voice alerts from in-car computers.

Officers who once managed the traditional information load may now find themselves overwhelmed.

NOTE: In all statements here where the proportion of responses are cited, numbers have been rounded for brevity and may not total 100%.



In their own words

“Officers have enough tech to look at to take their attention away from their surroundings while on duty. I want my officers to have their heads up and on a swivel, not stuck looking at tech constantly. If I could add one thing to our current cruisers it would be cameras facing to the front and rear. Maybe a prisoner compartment camera.”

The survey lens

Police1’s “What Cops Want in 2025” survey focused in part on situational awareness technology and how these tools help or hinder patrol officers. Responses were diverse, with no clear mandate that any single technology is universally beneficial.

One issue that was clear is that technology can be great when you have it and it works. Unfortunately, there are plenty of cops who don’t have access to the best tech, and when they have it, it’s often broken.

Small agency challenges

Television shows like *The Rookie* can give the impression that every police department is equipped like LAPD, with multiple cameras, body-worn cameras (BWCs), multi-channel radios and sophisticated data systems. In reality, [nearly half of all U.S. law enforcement agencies have fewer than 10 officers](#). Seventy-five percent have fewer than 25 officers, and 90% have fewer than 50.

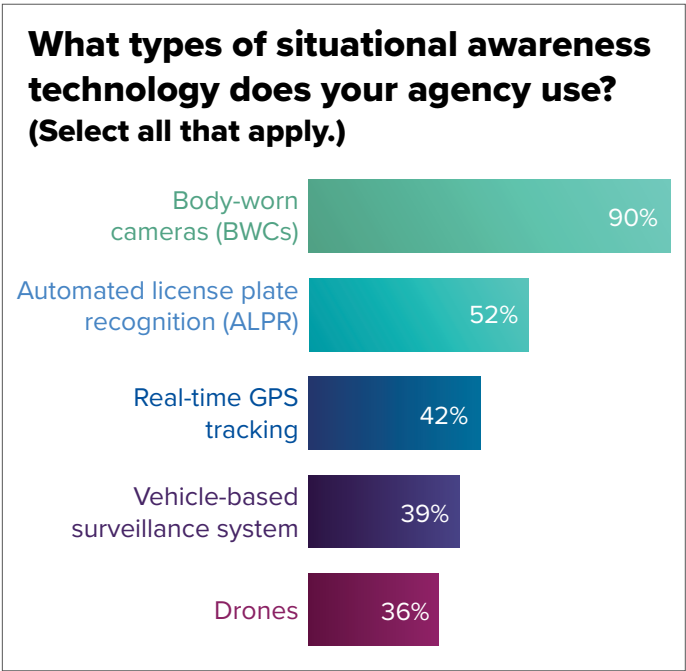
While some small agencies in wealthy communities can afford advanced systems, most are financially constrained — barely able to replace patrol cars and pay for fuel. Rural agencies often operate without access to larger infrastructure such as radio repeaters, data networks, or maintenance shops. For them, “high-tech” means a radio that works most of the time.

In their own words

“We currently do not have vehicle radio repeaters making our handheld units ineffective. Also, radio communications is dependent on geographical location. Systems such as satellite radio communications will give us significant coverage and minimize radio dead zones.”

What officers are using

The most common situational awareness technology in use are BWCs, with 90% of respondents reporting they had these in their agency. Vehicle-based surveillance systems are used by 39% of respondents, with 58% of cops using ALPR systems. Real-time global positioning satellite (GPS) technology is used by 42% of the surveyed officers, and 36% are using drones in the field.



Of the officers reporting they used vehicle-based surveillance systems such as in-car cameras, ALPRs and real-time data displays regular during patrols, 35% said they were “highly effective”; 38% either did not have such technology or didn’t use it if they did.

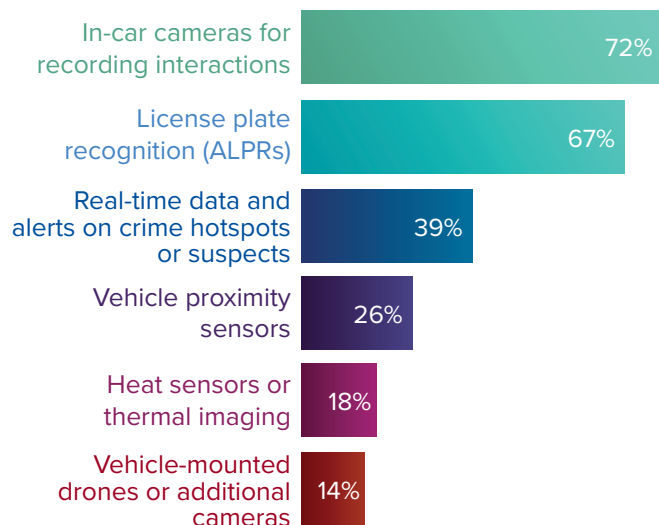


Photo/Getty Images

Officers want technology that is reliable, integrated, funded and supported with training. For some, that means advanced systems like facial recognition and drones.

When asked to list the situational awareness systems they thought were most effective, 72% put in-car video for recording interactions as their No. 1 choice, with ALPR a close second at 67%. Real-time alerts on “crime hotspots or suspects” came in at No. 3 with 39%, followed by vehicle proximity sensors (26%), thermal imaging (18%), and vehicle-mounted drones or additional cameras (14%).

Which situational awareness systems are most valuable? (Select all that apply.)



Technology “wish list”

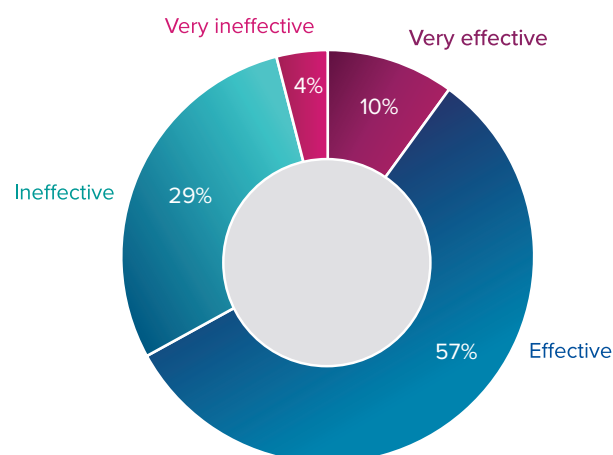
The “wish list” for technology the cops wanted but don’t have included “advanced vehicle surveillance systems” (53%), enhanced BWCs (46%), facial recognition tools (67%) and wearable sensors for health monitoring (30%).

The desire for more and better BWCs goes in the face of what many police critics said about cops when BWCs first appeared on the market. Many police critics opined that cops would resist use of the BWCs because they wouldn’t be able to get away with misconduct they had adopted as business as usual. In truth, [when BWCs were first deployed at the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department](#), results showed that officers equipped with the cameras were more productive

and sustained fewer personnel complaints. When there were complaints of officer misconduct, review of the BWC records allowed supervisors to classify the majority of complaints as “unfounded” most of the time and drastically reduced the cost of those investigations.

Vehicle proximity sensors were frequently mentioned in the comments as a desirable feature, but not all police package cars have them. Proximity sensors repurpose the lane change, backup and front-end collision warning sensors to form a surveillance system that operates when the police vehicle is parked. If the system detects movement toward the vehicle, a dashboard display indicates their approximate location, the windows roll up, and the doors lock. The effect is to keep an officer from being surprised or assaulted while they’re writing a report or otherwise distracted from the immediate environment. Ford calls its proximity sensor the “[Police Perimeter Alert System](#).” In the Dodge Charger, it’s the “[Officer Protection Package](#).” The Chevrolet Tahoe, although it has the same safety sensors as the other police package vehicles, does not have a system to warn an officer of an approaching person. Of course, officers driving cars that were manufactured before these systems became available, or whose cars were not ordered with the system, do without.

How effective are these technologies in enhancing your safety during contact with aggressive individuals?



Real-time alerts for details like suspect descriptions and active shooter incidents are effective, but could be more so. A third said their agencies supplied them with real-time information and they found it effective, but another 46% said the information was often delayed. In another question, 52% said they did not get real-time updates.

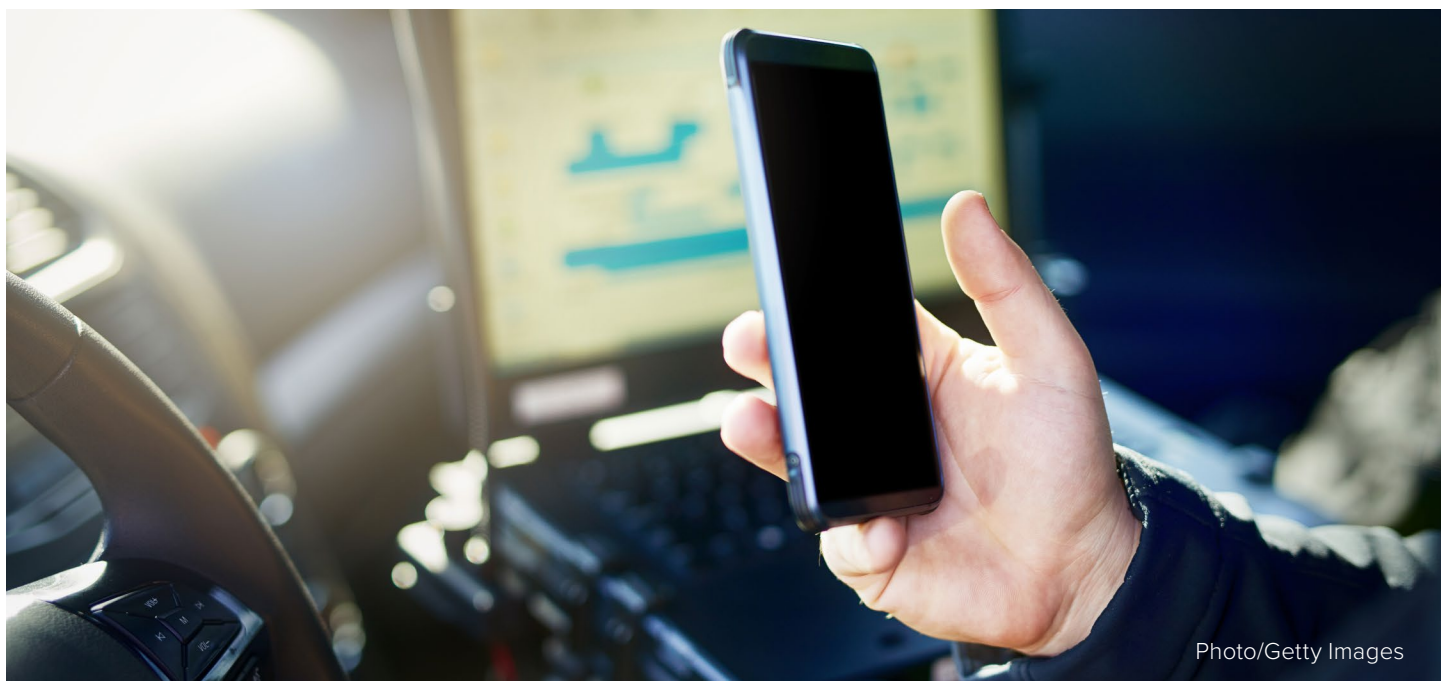
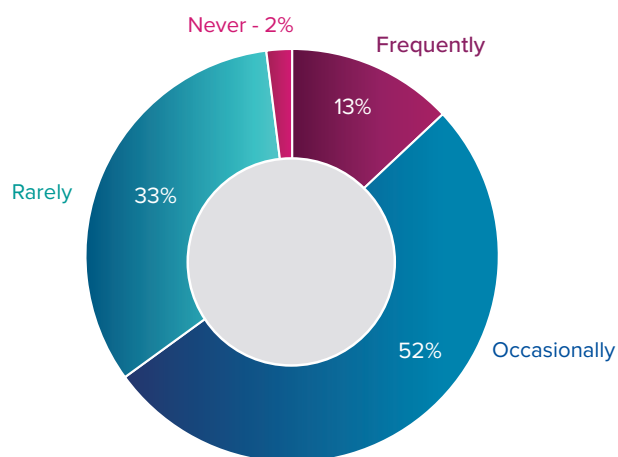
Cross-system interoperability is critical with technology, but it can be hard to come by. A large marketplace for police gear and systems encourages competition and arguably holds down prices, but it also means that System A doesn't necessarily talk to System B. The end officer must make sense of these different data streams and integrate them to their situation. The mobile data terminal doesn't necessarily talk to the in-car or body-worn cameras, and the ALPR may be in another "box" entirely. The BWC may be smart enough to know that the officer is in a foot pursuit, has gone down, or is being assaulted, but can it talk to the radio and call for help?

This situation was reflected in the survey results. When asked if the situational awareness tools in use by individual officers were integrated with other agency systems, only 5% said they "strongly

agree"; 28% said "agree," 36% were neutral, and 31% said they disagreed or strongly disagreed.

When respondents were asked to list the challenges they faced in using situational awareness tech, "poor integration" was the most frequent response, with 51% citing this problem. Other issues included insufficient training (39%), technology malfunctions or lack of reliability (38%), delays in updates (46%), and being overwhelmed with information (30%).

How often do you experience technology failure during critical moments?



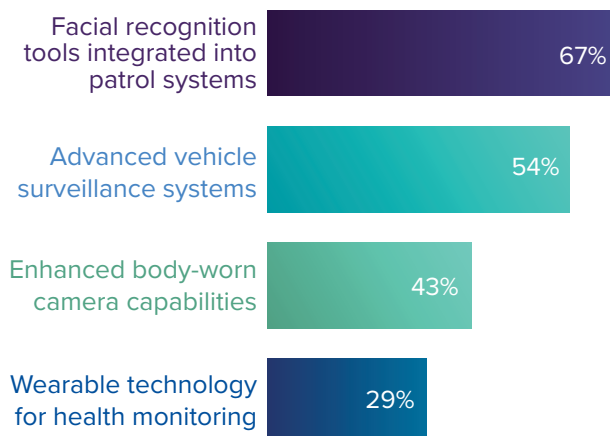
When respondents were asked to list the challenges they faced in using situational awareness tech, "poor integration" was the most frequent response, with 51% citing this problem.



Reliability reports were mixed. Ten percent said their technology failed “frequently,” 50% said it went south “occasionally,” and 40% said their gear failed “rarely” or “never.” When the equipment does fail, 17% of officers said their agency fixes or provides a backup immediately, 50% said the gear gets fixed eventually but there is usually an interim solution, and 28% said failures were rarely fixed quickly.

Reports on the adequacy of training with their technology were similarly uneven: 23% agreed or strongly agreed that their training was adequate, 42% were neutral, and 35% disagreed or strongly disagreed that they had effective training.

What additional situational awareness tools do you think would be most beneficial for your safety?



Leadership and culture shape tech adoption

While officers clearly value technologies like in-car cameras, ALPRs and real-time data, the survey underscores a larger truth: tools alone don’t drive change. Leaders set the tone for how technology is implemented, from establishing clear policies to building trust that these tools enhance safety and transparency rather than serve as discipline traps. A supportive culture helps officers embrace new systems, while weak leadership or mixed messaging can stall adoption no matter how advanced the tool.

Officers were asked if their departmental culture prioritized officer safety over administrative concerns: 56% agreed or strongly agreed with this premise, where 44% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Asked a similar question about how well agency leadership addresses officer safety concerns, responses were similar: 59% said their leadership responds “well” or “very well,” while the remaining 40% said “not very well,” or “poorly.” This is encouraging but also sobering to think that 4 out of 10 cops believe their agencies do not regard officer safety as a priority. Consistently, a later question showed that agency policies on safety-related issues were “excellent” (10%), “good” (56%), “poor (27%) or “very poor” (7%).

In their own words

Administrators/command staff/ investigations need to wear the same uniform and equipment as patrol officers and work at least a shift a month on the streets. Most wear Class As, have never used a TASER, bodycam, etc., and are very disconnected with modern law enforcement and issues. They look at everything from an “ivory tower” mentality and stay in the office and are home every day at 4 p.m. Heavy-handed discipline is the only answer for mistakes or errors, and it is glossed over that field training is poor and supervisors are poorly trained.

Another question asked how well agencies provided for recovery and reintegration after officers were victims of an assault. Only 18% said they had comprehensive policies in place. 39% said they had limited policies, and 36% said there were no policies at all; 6% weren't sure. Of the recovery and reintegration measures available, 79% provided some sort of counseling, 71% had peer support groups, 44% offered physical therapy, and 45% had paid recovery leave. Mentioned several times in the comments was that the counseling services were from an employee assistance program, and that officers were skeptical of the confidentiality of that program. They believe that whatever they say to the EAP counselor will find its way back to the agency executive.

Despite the occasional skepticism, 67% regarded these programs as “very effective” or “effective,” where 33% classified them as “ineffective” or “very ineffective.”



In their own words

Instead of workers' compensation, I would like to see the agency accept the workers' compensation and keep paying the employee as usual. Reduced pay, although tax free, is not a real benefit given money you would normally have from work. It is a punishment for on-the-job injuries along with terrible medical care. Delayed diagnostics because they don't want to pay for an MRI when that's what you need. Meds and physical therapy ordered before a proper diagnosis. Crazy to comprehend until you experience it.

Debriefings, either with peers or facilitated by professional therapists, are a common method of defusing the emotional overload that comes with handling a critical incident. The “critical incident” can be almost anything: Plane crashes, fatal injury auto accidents, shootings, gruesome injuries to a child, or the suicide of a fellow officer can all traumatize the responders. Twenty-seven percent of officers in the survey said their agencies “always” hold critical incident debriefings, where 40% said their agency was inconsistent in this practice. Shockingly, 28% said they don’t have debriefings at all.

What does all this tell us? Technology can be a great supplement, but policing remains an intensely human labor. No matter how sophisticated the technology, there always needs to be a person in the loop. That person, while vital, is also fragile. They need to be cared for physically and emotionally, and leadership has to stay in touch with the realities of the job and support the individual.

Agency executives have to appreciate that their cops are consumers of their administrative services. The officers, deputies, and troopers need workable policies, functional and reliable equipment, adequate training, and aftercare when the physical and emotional stresses of the job overcome the individual. Providing all of that requires that the leaders get out of the office occasionally and get into the field, attend line-level training to ensure quality, and find out for themselves what is working and what isn’t. The result will be a better-run law enforcement agency with more satisfied, productive troops. **1**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tim Dees is a retired police officer and the former editor of two major law enforcement websites who writes and consults on technology applications in criminal justice. He can be reached at tim@timdees.com.



THE **TECH** COPS WANT

1 When tools don't exist

Many officers said they don't struggle with unreliable tools because they simply don't have any to begin with.

"We don't have any situational awareness technology at all."

"We just don't have it."

"Limited resources mean we can't afford the tools."

Small agencies in particular reported going without equipment larger departments take for granted. Several pointed out that radios — still the most basic safety tool — often don't function reliably.

"Antiquated radio infrastructure needs to be replaced."

"Just a radio that works."

2 Procurement frustrations

Even when agencies provide technology, officers say the purchase process leaves them stuck with inadequate gear.

"Our city requires low-bid purchases so we get junk equipment."

"Quit purchasing the cheapest systems and get equipment that actually works."

"We buy the most cost-effective, not what is best for officers."

The result, according to one respondent: **"NOTHING WORKS."**

3 A wish list that blends high-tech and basic needs

Asked what tools would improve safety, officers showed interest in both advanced and practical solutions. Facial recognition, enhanced BWCs and vehicle surveillance systems topped the quantitative results. But the written comments offered a more nuanced view.

Some wanted cutting-edge features:

"Integration of GPS across radios, in-car and body cameras."

"Portable fingerprint readers and Rapid ID systems."

"Drone response capability."

"Real-time crime analysts."

Others went back to basics:

"Full-time rear and side-facing cameras."

"Better cooperation with local departments."

"An emergency call function on our radios."

Taken together, the responses show that "tech cops want" isn't only about futuristic tools — it's about filling long-standing gaps in patrol readiness.

4 How to fix what's already on the street

Even when agencies invest in new systems, officers say too often the tools are unreliable, poorly integrated, or rolled out with little training.

Training came up again and again:

"More training and more up-to-date equipment."

"Annual refresher courses so people know how to use what we already have."

"Teach us. I've had to teach myself or ask younger officers how to use new tools."

Reliability was another constant theme:

"Longer-lasting batteries for our body cams."

"Durability. Longevity."

"Get equipment that works and keep it working."

And integration may be the single most repeated need:

"One single solution to integrate body cameras, in-car cameras and ALPRs."

"Integration of LPR into Axon video for both in-car and body cameras."

"Too many systems operate independently — we need them to talk to each other."

Several officers argued that constant failures and lack of support leave them worse off than before.

"Our systems do not integrate well. Dispatch is a separate county entity, and it hampers us."

"Recapitalizing the entire archaic infrastructure is the only fix."

5 Funding and equity across agencies

Behind many of these frustrations is a simple barrier: money. Smaller and rural agencies, officers said, often lack the budget for even the basics, while larger agencies can afford the latest generation of tools.

"For the state to provide smaller agencies with funding so they can afford modern tools."

"We struggle immensely to purchase new technology."

Some officers asked for better grant support and smarter budgeting:

"Would love to have a list of grants we could use."

"Needs to be budgeted for maintenance and upgrades, not just initial purchase."

6 The bottom line

Officers want technology that is reliable, integrated, funded and supported with training. For some, that means advanced systems like facial recognition and drones. For others, it means radios that work and cameras that don't die mid-shift.

The message from the survey is clear: tech alone won't solve the awareness challenge, but when done right, it can keep officers safer, sharper and better prepared for the realities of patrol.

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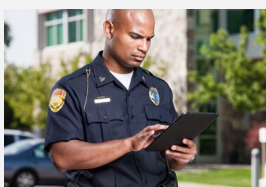
Agencies must provide their officers with the training they need to be just as competent with their firearm off duty as they are on duty



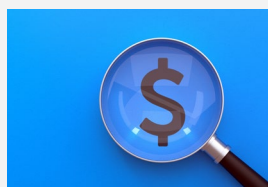
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1 [Access additional analysis of Police1's survey here.](#)



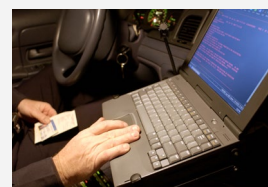
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